

Luce, Henry Robinson

Convocation Address

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Members of the graduating class and of the whole fellowship of Ohio State:

We Americans are always most grateful and happiest when we may celebrate as we do on this occasion, the on-going of American life. We can be proud today that the time is a time of the going forth of a strong America. And I am glad, as you are, that the place is Ohio because I owe much in work and in friendship to this state. And yet the exact time and place are not wholly important. For the essence of this occasion is not its occurrence but its recurrence. The fact that this ceremony of graduation is happening everywhere in America -- this uniquely American hail and farewell -- the fact that for upwards of 100 years it has happened and that, pray God, it will happen for hundreds of years to come -- all this gives to your graduation day a meaning which, like the experience of beauty, is both deeply personal and transcendent.

Not that Americans have ever assumed that their on-going was an automatic matter. As the years go by and as these occasions come, we have the need and habit to ask again and state again what it is that shall go on and why we are determined that it shall. We Americans do better -- and are happier -- when we know what it is we're aiming at.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of visiting one of our largest army camps -- Fort Benning, Georgia --

a vast terrain of two or three hundred square miles where more than 100,000 soldiers are encamped. What I found there was not what we commonly think of as an army, but, instead, a most amazing educational institution -- the Infantry School. The visitor is taken through dozens and scores of classrooms, in each of which the art of teaching comes alive with an almost electric quality. And then out under the bright sun are not one or two but fifty or sixty out-door classrooms. An out-door classroom consists of a grandstand for several hundred students and stretched out before them two or three miles of field and wood -- hill-side and gully -- the whole of it wired for sound so that the student in the grandstand may hear what a platoon-leader is saying as he leads his men, crawling on their bellies, through a ravine a mile away. Thus war is taught, indoors and out, not merely as a series of occupational routines, but, even to its smallest units, as an art, a science, as a challenge to every quality of body, mind and spirit.

Just when I feared I was being too much carried away with enthusiasm for this amazing educational institution, I encountered a young man who had left our office about a year ago. This young man was not only a gifted writer but also, as it happened, one of the most educated young men on our staff. He had been to the best schools and to several universities, here and abroad. Six months before our meeting he had been graduated as a second

lieutenant. Physically he was, of course, much changed -- tanned, seemingly two inches taller, strong and supple. That did not surprise me. But what he said did surprise me, for very earnestly he said: "I consider that my education began at Fort Benning".

I shall not attempt to review all that he and many others have discovered about education in, of all places, the laboratory of war. But the essential difference between Fort Benning and our civilian education is, I think, obvious. Fort Benning has a purpose, -- one clear, sharp, central purpose.

An able colored preacher when asked for the secret of his success supplied the following formula: "First", he said, "I tells 'em what I'se goin' to tell 'em. And then I tells 'em. And then I tells 'em what they done been told."

This excellent advice I can follow only in part. For first of all what I want to do this morning is not to tell you but to ask you. This is the question: Does the American nation exist for any particular purpose? It is for you in your generation to give the answer -- with, I hope, more help than hindrance from mine.

My question is not whether there is purpose in human existence as a whole. My question is only a part of that larger and eternal inquiry. And I mean, also, to distinguish sharply between a "particular purpose" and the generality of urges and desires by which masses of men are at all times and places more or less similarly driven and

drawn. The vast tapestry of history reveals men and groups of men over tens of thousands of years struggling, with now more now less success, to improve their lot and render themselves less brutish. America and the Americans are part of that human drama with all its play of fate and motive. But from among all the motivations of history, can we separate out one clear purpose and say: For this purpose America is created, for this purpose America lives?

The answer, surely, already rises in your hearts -- that the American nation does exist for a specific purpose, and that our purpose is -- in the words of the Battle Hymn: "To make men free".

I say the answer rises in your hearts. Some might say that I am taking liberties in making that assumption. Indeed, for 20 years, for the space of a generation, the miasma of materialism has choked that answer in the throat. How, then, is it that I can feel entitled to assume that this truth rises in your hearts, that American exists to make men free?

There are two reasons why I not only can but must assume it. The first is a personal reason. It is my experience that Americans, my own contemporaries, really do believe this -- diffidently, perhaps -- obscurely, if you like -- but deeply in their hearts, and especially in those moments that come to all of us, when we feel our country as a living, intimate reality. I can never forget, for instance the statement of that Kansas farmer, who said, when he heard that his son had been killed in action in the Pacific: "He died for the greatest cause in the world -- the freedom of all men."

Yet if this reason seems too personal, there is a far weightier one. It needs no laboring of history to prove that, for the first 150 years of its existence, this Republic thought it had this purpose. The Declaration of Independence represented no mere nationalistic revolt against an empire. It was a Declaration of a continuing purpose -- the purpose of freedom. And the purpose long continued. Its greatest prophet and spokesman lived almost a hundred years later -- I mean, of course, Abraham Lincoln. "Lincoln believed" -- I quote a great historian -- "Lincoln believed that American nationality exists not as an end in itself but as a means to the larger end of furthering the ideal of human freedom."

Even foreigners understood that the Republic of the United States was a nation with this particular purpose. A decade before Lincoln made the full statement of his faith, Harriet Beecher Stowe went to Europe and from there wrote home from London:

"Why do foreign lands regard us with such intensity of interest? Is it not because the whole world looks hopefully toward America as a nation especially raised by God to advance the cause of human liberty?"

Harriet was partly naive. Not all Europeans looked hopefully. Some looked fearfully; most, skeptically; but all with an intensity of interest because here was something new in the world -- a nation existing for a purpose. To understand how novel this was, we have but to

reflect a moment on the concept of the state in European history. In the Middle Ages there was indeed a theory of the purpose of states. States existed as parts of the Christendom and the purpose of all of them alike was to maintain order, to keep the peace. Their task was not the salvation of the people. The work of salvation, of civilization, was conceived to be and very largely was the work of the Church. States could help the Church in the fulfillment of its mission but, apart from the Church, States could have no ideal mission. This notion held over into the rise of nationalism. Thus Spain conceived itself to have some mission from the Pope to Christianize the Western World. But actually, as the great nations grew, and as the modern theory of nationalism grew, there developed no European theory comparable to Lincoln's -- that the very existence of a nation was inherent in its ideal purpose.

Let me pause one moment more to illustrate how unprecedented this proposition was and is. Outside of America the most notable example of an attempt to found a State for a purpose was in England under Oliver Cromwell. Stoutly the Ironsides proclaimed that they proposed to establish in England "the new Jerusalem". But though Cromwellians represented a mighty force in England which persists to this day, their messianic purpose was not suited to the prevailing temper of England. Cromwellian England lasted only 20 years and was followed by the gay restoration

of Merry King Charles -- and the Ship of State finally got back on even keel again with Queen Anne and John Churchill, Duke of Marlboro.

I make comparisons but they are not odious. For example, if a balance sheet could be drawn, it would, I suppose, show that Civilization, up to this moment, owes more to England than to the United States. Thus I emphasize that I am speaking not of total good, I speak only of freedom. And even as to freedom itself, it may well be that not even yet has America contributed as much to the knowledge and practice of Freedom as have the British Isles. Through the centuries since Magna Carta, Englishmen have hammered out their liberties in the bold strokes of their temperament against the anvil of their proper interests. But the distinction I am drawing lies in this fact: that the British state was not thought to have, either under Queen Elizabeth or Queen Victoria, the one and supreme purpose -- "to make men free".

Now Abe Lincoln did think that the American nation existed precisely and specially for that purpose. It was an extraordinary thought to think. It was more than a thought. In the minds of our fathers' fathers it was a fact. Is it still a fact? May we still believe it? Shall we make it a fact -- which no power can ever again deny -- either on this continent or throughout the world?

Before going further, I must state what I mean by Freedom. By Freedom, then I mean political Freedom. There are other freedoms -- desirable freedoms. If we

desired to speak of a really comprehensive freedom, we could hardly do better than to fix on the freedom advocated by St. Paul the Apostle -- freedom from sin. But I do not today stretch the meaning of Freedom to include freedom from all the ills which beset man's flesh and spirit. I mean what our fathers' fathers meant -- political freedom.

And secondly, we know quite well enough what that freedom is -- though we sometimes forget the simple lesson and though the term is often distorted. Of political freedom a clear and unmistakable picture is rendered in our Bill of Rights and also in other human compacts which affirm what we call civil liberties.

Furthermore, we also know well enough what are the true and necessary implications of political freedom. Political freedom implies some form of representative government which respects the rights of minorities and individuals even more than the will of majorities. Political freedom further implies the profoundest respect for Law, since in a free society, order must be maintained rather by consent than by force. Finally, political freedom implies the existence of a living God, for without that assumption, political freedom has no clear vindication either in Reason -- or in Experience. Thus Plato, who understood very well about Goodness, Beauty and Truth, was wholly ignorant of the nature of political freedom.

The peculiar purpose, then, of the American nation has not been to make men good or beautiful or wealthy or wise. These purposes are presumably universal aims -- and it has yet to be demonstrated that Goodness

and Beauty are more nearly achieved by Americans than by others. Nevertheless -- "as He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free". Therein, we seek to remind ourselves today, is the particular purpose of the American nation. Shall we affirm that it still is?

Many among us today say, flatly, "No". And many among us say, "Yes but".

According to the "No"s, the American nation has no particular mission; it probably never did have; anyway, from now on, America is to be no different from any other great state: it is simply to pursue its own best interests, with, naturally expedient regard for other powers. The whole of what I have to say is a criticism of this view. It is, to be sure, a plausible view. It is the logical fruit of modern materialistic thought. It attracts men of ill-will. It attracts, also, those who, in the fashion of the day, call themselves "realists". History may prove it to be right. But I reject it. I want America to be different -- always -- to have a purpose -- always until all men are free.

As for the "Yes but"ers -- they go to the opposite extreme -- and extremes, as we know, often meet. The "Yes but"ers are in some ways even more dangerous. According to them, political freedom is okay but -- it is not enough. According to them, the mission of America should be nothing less -- or hardly less -- than the total elevation and benefaction of all mankind. This view of collective benevolence attracts many idealists. Many Americans, like myself, are reluctant to reject it. For in asserting that America has a mission this view follows the great American tradition.

Nevertheless when the American people stop to think about it, -- and they have -- they reject it. With good reason. For Americans realize that they have never entered into any compact with each other or with their forbearers to provide wellbeing for all mankind. An American can not honestly feel that he is bound by any such obligation nor that any government of his can so bind him. America may in fact contribute to the welfare of mankind in greater measure than any other nation in history. Let us pray we can meet that opportunity. But to say that it is the national purpose of this country to reform and elevate and support mankind is as false to ourselves as it is surely offensive to others.

The point goes deep into our present confusions. The point is that not every mission is appropriate to the political state. To claim for the secular state an unlimited mission to do good is to invite infinite confusion, ugly strife and, ultimately, disaster. But political freedom is a uniquely appropriate mission of the political state.

Nor need we doubt that the purpose to make men free is an abundantly adequate purpose. It is a purpose, an ideal, still far, far from fulfillment. The greatest battles of freedom, believe me, are still to be fought -- even, here, perhaps, in the land of the free. In affirming the purpose of freedom both at home and abroad we shall achieve a unifying principle in both domestic and foreign policies which is essential to the success of either.

Let us briefly test the principle of freedom in action. First, then, as to domestic affairs. For the decade preceding the war, our domestic affairs seemed to be largely a series of problems in economics. We worried a great deal about economic freedom and economic democracy; political freedom was more or less taken for granted.

I submit that if this nation rededicates itself to the quest of political freedom, our economic problem will be solved with more speed, more unanimity and more style. The quest of political freedom is not an evasion of economic realities. It is too large, hard and fertile a quest to be that. For if our goal is truly to make and keep ourselves politically free, we must be the sworn enemy of any economic fact that interferes with that freedom. Unemployment is such a fact; when too many men are unemployed too long, political freedom becomes hollow. A cartelized or bureaucratized economy is such a fact, for a monopolistic group or a government that controls men's livings may control their political will. Thus, the defense of political freedom involves us in battles on many fronts. But we will fight more effectively if we are quite clear what we are defending. We are not defending any assumed right of all men to eat or to work or to own a Frigidaire, or to make a million dollars. Those will be by-products of our victory. We are fighting for the one natural right of all men, the only such right America recognizes -- the right to be politically free.

Apply, then, the test of freedom to the future of our Foreign Policy. Most Americans think of the job ahead as a job of making what is called a just and durable peace. But Americans differ as to how the job can best be

done and many Americans, perhaps most, doubt whether it can be done. Now our attitude of skepticism has its uses -- though nothing is ever achieved by mere skepticism. In one respect, especially, this skepticism points in a useful direction. For actually, the job before the American people is not the making of peace -- that is only half the job and the smaller half. You can't make peace like you make a bridge -- plan it, engineer it, erect it and then open it for decades of traffic without any further bother except minor repairs. Peace is not something which is made. Peace is a result to be continuously achieved by continuous and vigorous action and policy. The job ahead of us, then, is not the making of Peace but the working out of a Foreign Policy -- a policy which shall be dynamic, on-going, reasonably continuous and persistent. That is the job ahead of the leaders and people of America. Well, how do we begin? I say we begin with what we are -- we being, if we are anything a people committed to the purpose of Freedom. If we make that purpose clear in our foreign policy, we have at one stroke achieved two great things. First, we will make ourselves plain to all the other nations of the world, hitherto confused by our years of official and unofficial double-talk. Second, even more important, we will have a policy fit to command the understanding and support of the American people.

A principal charge levelled against America has been that its Foreign Policy has been quixotic, changeable, unpredictable. Hitler perhaps has most reason to complain

against the uncertainty of American Foreign Policy. But unfortunately he is not the only one to suffer from this fault. Tens of millions of men and women all over the world lie dead or suffering -- and a more forthright American foreign policy might have spared them.

The trouble with American policy has been a lack of understanding among Americans themselves as to what on earth their Foreign Policy was or ought to be. The time is ripe now, I think, to put this straight.

Somewhere in the last 40 or 80 years the world became, as the saying is, one world. There is no argument on that premise -- certainly none worth the attention of intelligent men. But we must go on now from the fact to the behavior which it demands. Now that we are agreed that it is one world, we have to shape an American policy which serves our deepest purposes in that world.

Let me give you a concrete illustration of the policy of Freedom in action. Some of my associates and I spent much of the early part of this year in a study of the post-war problems of Europe, and in this we had the invaluable help of some of the ablest students of the subject, American and foreign. If anyone tells me that problems of Europe are infinitely complex -- I am prepared to answer -- "and how"! Innumerable details of the difficulties must have escaped our notice but we ran into enough assorted problems to fill the Encyclopaedia Britannica twice over. Nevertheless we, for our part, managed to arrive at some basic conclusions. And in my opinion the most important

conclusion was this: that the greatest American interest in Europe is the establishment in Europe of political freedom. The test of political freedom, as we know, is a bill of rights. Therefore quite precisely, the greatest American interest in Europe would be attained if each of the European nations was to adopt a fundamental Bill of Rights beyond the reach of whatever government was in power in any country. Will Europe do that? I do not know. I know this. A peace based on alliances and agreements with nations having no bill of rights will be a poor peace. During that kind of peace, I would pray that America remain armed to the teeth. But the greatest guarantee that "this will never happen again" will be a world in which most of the nations are nations where political freedom is solemnly guaranteed or earnestly sought. Thus the paramount material interest of our nation, which is Peace, ultimately coincides with the purpose for which the nation exists -- namely, the promotion of political freedom.

Now, some will say that the Foreign Policy of Freedom will involve "interference" in the affairs of other nations. I agree. If it be true that the world is now interdependent, then, under any policy and any scheme of things, every nation, certainly every great nation must be ceaselessly concerned with the affairs of other nations -- and to that extent any policy is a policy of "interference". Some vocalists among our Good Neighbors -- in all hemispheres -- occasionally let out cries of protest against what they

call American "interference". They also condemn American isolationism. But isolationism and non-interference are one and the same thing. To ask us to give up our isolationism and then to ask us also not to "interfere" is utter nonsense and they know it. We interfered with Hitler. Most everybody but Hitler thanks us for that. Of course we should have interfered with him long, long before we did -- it would have cost us a lot less. By the same token, in the interdependent world, we must concern ourselves to take note when and wherever in the world there exists or rises up any other Hitler or any other form of enmity to political freedom. Having noted where and what the enmity is, the steps we take may be appropriate to the occasion.

The Foreign Policy of Freedom need not conjure up a picture of intemperate, excited alarms and excursions about the world. Freedom cannot be imposed. But the Foreign Policy of Freedom requires us to distinguish between the nations of the free and of the unfree. Of free men everywhere and of men struggling to be free, we are the natural ally.

The task of distinguishing between the free and the unfree will not always be easy. I do not speak of an easy policy. I speak of a great policy, requiring intelligence, vigor, and devotion.

Much of the world will be, we hope, in various stages of transition toward political freedom. Having yet

much to learn about the application of freedom in our own industrial society, we may watch with tolerance the progress of freedom in societies different from our own. But we can be tolerant without being indifferent. We can be willing to learn from others without being faithless to what we know. And in being persistently concerned about freedom, we will be what others expect Americans to be.

A few days ago in North Africa, General Giraud was asked: "What are we fighting for?" He replied: "As a Frenchman I say simply, for the liberation of France ... But if I were an American I would say: for the freedom of the world".

"If I were an American ..." Shall we not then be still Americans -- and more than ever Americans in the clarity of our purpose to encourage and sustain, by all suitable means, a prevailing pattern of Freedom throughout the world. In that pattern lies our peace -- yes, and more than peace, for in the widening pattern of Freedom lies the fulfillment of the great adventure which brought you here today.

When the founding fathers in 1776 proclaimed the mission of Freedom on this continent, they did so in a spirit of supreme adventure. They imagined that their resolve to make a nation of free men was, of all human adventures that ever were, the greatest and the noblest.

Theirs was an adventure in ideas -- for the truth about freedom, still young in the world, had to be established in the mind no less than in the heart. Theirs was

an adventure in ideas -- for the truth about freedom, still young in the world, had to be established in the mind no less than in the heart. Theirs was an adventure in work and labor -- for the claiming and building up of this continent was, to them, the verification of the truth they asserted. And they knew that so great an enterprise, like all the great aspirations of the human spirit must lead through the sloughs of despond and even through the valleys of the shadow of death. So, too, it leads you now.

You embark upon the adventure of your lives. Let the same spirit of adventure, of pioneers, sustain you always. It is not wholly unfortunate that if you must meet it, you meet at the outset, war, the roughest and wickedest hazard in the human adventure. No later test will be so hard -- if only you meet it in the same spirit of courage and resolution with which you will meet this opening onslaught on your ~~lives~~ and happiness. We pray that all but the least possible number of you may return -- return to a land and a world which is abundantly open for you to pursue the individual adventure of your **lives**. Some of you will be thinkers and artists. Some of you will be craftsmen, specialists, businessmen, public servants. Some will be homemakers and some will be far-voyagers through the skies and lands and seas. May each of you in each individual life find the fulness of adventure and the joy of fulfillment. And know, that however far you may be separated from your friends of today, you are all one, we Americans are all one in this -- that we are bound by one compelling and everlasting purpose. We live to make men free. Take

this yoke upon you and find that because you were born an American, this yoke is easy and because it is so laden with hope for all mankind, its burden is light.